

FOLK-SONG AND THE POPULAR SONG

Folk-Song or Music-Hall Song?

I SAID in my last article in THE CHOIR (February 1912), that 'the same class of people who formerly sang folk-song now sing the music-hall production,' and for this remark I am taken to task by a correspondent who denies the proposition. I further added that the reason was because there was a distinct singable air associated with the music-hall song, as there was in the folk-song. The correspondent goes on to say that he would be exceedingly discouraged with our musical outlook if he thought 'that the abominable trash which is howled by a certain uneducated class of people had taken possession of the minds of our respectable middle-classes of town and country, such as he believed to have been the singers of folk-song.'

This is all very well, but I must adhere to my opinion, which is not only mine but that of a great many others. The popular part of the recent folk-song movement is not to provide a songless people with songs, but to substitute songs of merit for the aforesaid 'abominable trash,' as he puts it in his letter.

It has been a matter of remark, and of regret, that folk-song has died out in country villages, and that, instead, we find the music-hall ditty in its place. Many people foster a hope that the folk-song can be brought back again as an element of village life, and that the younger generation will sing with renewed vigour the songs and ballads their grandfathers and great grandfathers delighted in.

This motive is worthy of all encouragement, and it is not the purpose of this article to throw cold water on any such scheme of revival.

Folk-Song a Living and Spontaneous Thing

When our ancestors sang folk-song it was a very living thing - it was, in fact, the current song, and it was not a song that had been taught by the village school-master to his scholars; it was a spontaneous expression of lyric enthusiasm about subjects in which the singers were interested. We must also remember that the village or town singer of folk-song sang, according to his nature, either a pure song or an undesirable one. In bygone times there was always a class who voiced ditties ('howled' them, if you like) which are equivalent to the 'abominable trash' above referred to, and some of these songs, it must with sorrow, be confessed, are found among our folksong. Every collector has had such offered to him, the tunes themselves being frequently worthy specimens of folk-music, while the words belonging to them are, most assuredly, best forgotten.

The true folk-song, pure and beautiful, is not to be obtained in great plenitude. It occurs with the rarity of a precious stone, and while a great many have been recently noted to add to our wealth of beautiful song and melody, yet too often we find that the everyday folk-song singer has not such wealth to offer.

I must revert back to my original contentions that the class who formerly sang folk-song now sing music-hall songs - that is, if they sing at all. I must confess that many an old man who would sing a folk-song in his youth is now silent. As I pointed out in my former article, the cause for this is the tunelessness of modern songs. It is really only among the music-hall lyrics that we find a tune that an ordinary person, not specially cultured in music, can sing or whistle to himself or to others. As a consequence, the ordinary person is far more silent, or absolutely so, in song than was his father or grandfather.

Has Popular Singing decreased?

When I was a small boy the streets rang with such songs as 'Annie Laurie,' 'Cheer, Boys, Cheer,' 'To the West,' 'Ever of Thee' and the like popular melodies. In the eighties these gave place to 'Nancy Lee,' 'Twickenham Ferry,' and, better still, to the Gilbert-Sullivan songs, &c. Since these times our musical culture in schools and elsewhere has increased twentyfold, but it may be asked, Has not our spontaneous and popular singing decreased in the same proportion; excluding the so-called 'abominable trash' or the music-hall?

Another question may also be put, Would the songs I have just mentioned as having street popularity be tolerated as correct in any of the music schools? If not, have these schools offered any substitute which has been acceptable for popular singing as a counterblast to the music-hall lyric?

Anyone who knows Blackpool or other similar northern watering-place on a Bank Holiday will remember that the popular hymn of the moment-say 'The Glory Song,' 'Count your many Blessings,' or what remains in remembrance of Moody and Sankey - has equal favour with songs from the music-hall. We may ask, Has that music which is taught and recognized in our music-schools had any material influence on our popular street-singing? Further, Has the work of any great modern composer, save perhaps Sullivan, had such influence, or provided a substitute for folk-song?

In the eighteenth century Boyce, Arne, Dibdin, Hook, and Shield, with others, were represented among all classes, and the songs of these composers, the best of their time, were on the lips of high and low. But they composed tunes that people could sing and enjoy. Mr. Chesterton has put this matter truly, if fantastically. He says: 'Once men sang together round a table in chorus; now one man sings alone, for the absurd reason that he can sing better. If scientific civilization goes on (which is most improbable) only one man will laugh, because he can laugh better than the rest.'

Modern Melody; Is it Absent?

Another dictum may be quoted. In one of his recent Oxford lectures Sir Walter Parratt is reported to have said: 'Many of our present-day composers would not write a bar of melody if they could, and many of them also could not write a bar of it if they would!'

If this be the case, no wonder we have to turn either to folk-song, or its alternative, the music-hall song. The fact, however, remains that for lyric or dance melody, apart from any bolstering up by harmonic combination, we have had to turn to rustics or illiterate persons who cannot read or put down a note of music, and that is why we have to turn to folk-song.

This ignoring of melody is part of that great wave which has swept over the arts and literature. We are so weak that we dare not accept anything that may be classed as 'pretty.' We dare not compose, or like music, that is 'tuney.' We must look upon life with a jaundiced eye, and accept bitter pessimistic philosophy that upsets all previously received notions.

Our literature and our paintings must depict matter which we before considered either as offensive or unworthy of art treatment. This is probably the secret of the truth of Sir Walter Parratt's remark.

And this is also why we must foster folksong as a precious spark of light among so much darkness; for certainly, though we may claim to have made many advances in musical taste and execution, yet it cannot be said to have affected that personage commonly referred to as 'The man in the street.'

The problem of reviving an interest in folk-songs among the class who formerly sang them is receiving attention from many workers, and it is to be hoped that it will meet with the success such an effort deserves. Those who study to solve the problem would do well to realize the position a little more than seems to be the case.

What was Folk-Song to the Folk-Song Singer?

The interest that an old folk-song singer took in his song was quite a different one from what the collector takes, and the conditions which caused him to sing, and to like the song, are also different from what holds to-day. His first interest was in the words, generally the least interesting to a modern collector. He might sing a beautiful air, with all its freshness and beauty little impaired from its original conception, he might unconsciously like the tune; but he would, most likely, fail to see the great significance it had; it would be the verse and the story that it told that would be the song's principal appeal. In that would lie its chief vitality. It was a song and not a piece of melody. Further, it would be a song that told a story, or voiced a sentiment.

In the earliest form of folk-song - the narrative ballad - the verse conformed to the easiest metre for remembrance and for making into rhyme. The simple tunes for such ballads were of the most primitive form and range, calculated to be used to lengthy ballads, and while subjected to great repetition, sufficiently pleasing to be 'catchy' and not to become greatly monotonous.

The airs which have been noted to ballads like 'Lord Bateman,' 'The Outlandish Knight,' and 'Barbara Allen' fulfil all these requirements. Such ballads as these came down to later times merely because of the interest to be found in their romantic stories.

When interest in such romances died, the folk-song maker turned to his own times for themes, and too often these were a maiden's tragedy, sung in sorrow, but not infrequently in triumph. The joys of a man's calling or occupation have a place in folk-song, but it is noticeable that only a few trades are considered to be worth singing about. Chief among these is that of the plough-boy, and following this closely is that of the master farmer. In the South and West of England these songs have far greater favour than in the North. The Northern farmer has less reason to boast of his calling than he of the South. A wet autumn, with a field of corn not lifted in late September, is scarcely a thing to be merry over!

Then there were other subjects that brought out the rustic muse. There were poaching songs, for instance; and there were press-gang songs also; both of which classes, no doubt, had personal interest to the singer. Perhaps his brother or father had been pressed; perhaps he himself did a night's poaching when opportunity served.

The Reason of its Being Alive

The chief thing to note about all this is that from one cause or another the folk-song was alive among its singers. It had an interest which it would be difficult to revive. If there was no other reason, perhaps it was a song that he remembered his father or his mother had sung when he was a lad, and so its association would be a tender one in such a case. Beyond the fact that certain songs were 'good old songs,' the antiquarian interest would be little.

The distractions of modern life are opposed to the preservation of any song remembered traditionally. Does any boy whistle last-year-but-one's pantomime songs? Not he; he has the latest American importation on his lips. In the big agricultural tracts of the South and West, and in Midland England, folk-song can be gathered yet in moderate plenty; but not so in districts of the North, where the worker's life is a busy rush.

If folk-song can drift downward to the younger generation as a pleasant memory, it may rest for a time among the kind of people who gave it birth; let this then be our aim.

Also, if our English composers, as several (all honour to them) have already done, will follow the path that our folk-song indicates, we may have a much-needed revival in the moribund, if not dead, school of English music that was at its height at the close of the seventeenth century.

Also, if in aid of such a movement, those who select music for public performance will, for a time, give British melody - good, even if tuneful - a little chance, there will be a welcome to it accorded which, I think, will cause astonishment.

Our English national music, in which we may include our folk-song, has never had a chance of adequate rendering given it, and the people who are now silent and songless are hungry for it, and performers have to be content with what the music-hall and the pantomime provide.

It may be well asked, 'Are popularity and art so wide asunder that they can never join?' The snobbery of cult has done the worst possible harm to English music, and excluded it from its proper place. Once let it take this place, we shall not have to complain that our villagers sing nothing but music-hall 'trash.'

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